

The Distance Between Two Soulmates is an AU by theamiableanachronism

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Summary: A series of soulmate AU prompt drabbles

1. Stuck Song Syndrome

Of all the insubordinate habits Eleven displayed, by far the most difficult to break was the humming. Like most children, she would improvise and hum little tunes under her breath. That alone would be grounds for discouragement as it was a distraction from her tasks. However, when she started humming songs it would be impossible for her to know, popular songs on the radio and traditional children's songs, the first assumption was that supervisors were careless and exposing her to them, but increased surveillance proved it false. Perhaps it was a demonstration of a new ability to pick up radio waves. Such a capability could prove useful, yet investigations of local radio stations were inconclusive; the songs she hummed were never being played at the same time. Since they could not control the habit, it had to be terminated.

However, despite their most concentrated efforts, Eleven continued to hum.

They tried rebukes and scolding.

They tried withholding privileges, such as recreational time or mealtimes.

They even tried locking her in the detention room.

Questions could be ignored and silenced. Disobedience could be punished.

But humming?

Naturally, after so many punishments, it was quieter, but not nonexistent. Eleven would only hum when she was completely alone, in her sleeping area or even the detention room.

The punishments continued, for surveillance never left her truly alone. But her humming continued until the day she disappeared.

Mike had always been a singer. He never sang in public, was never in the choir or Glee club at school, and rarely even sang in church. But in moments when he thought he was by himself, he would sing quietly under his breath, usually songs from the radio or, when he was younger, nursery rhymes. But there were other times when Karen would happen to walk in on him singing a new song, one without words. When she'd ask him what it was, he would shrug and say it just came to him. For a while, she'd hoped that meant he was a musician, but piano lessons crashed and burned, guitar lessons lasted

barely a month, and the only writing he seemed interested in was writing campaigns, not compositions.

But his singing continued. She'd catch him in little moments, doing his homework, cleaning his room, all the while a song under his breath. She supposed it comforted him. He often came home from school discouraged, but always explained it as just being tired, although she noticed any exhaustion disappeared when the boys arrived for another campaign. She didn't ask. He needed his space and if music gave him some comfort, she wasn't going to discourage it.

For a long time, it hadn't seemed like things would ever go back to normal. Everyone knew it was impossible after everything that had happened over the past two years, but there was still that lingering hope and yearning for calm and comfort. And it came. Eventually. There were days of tears and pain that would never completely leave, but there were also days of peace, where the pain wasn't quite so sharp. It was on those days that Joyce would notice a faint melody coming from El's room at the end of the hallway and she'd turn the television or radio down a few notches just to take that breath of relief because today was a good day. It was on these days that Karen would smile quietly to herself as Mike swung downstairs into the basement, another song on his lips, the days of dark circles and sleepless red eyes over.

It was on one of these days that Mike woke up with a song stuck in his head. It happened to everybody from time to time. His grandma used to joke that it meant his soulmate was actually singing it, that they were connected by the beauty of music blah blah blah. He thought it was corny, since most of the time it was just a song from the radio or a crummy commercial jingle. But some days, like today, it was a song he'd never heard before but couldn't seem to shake. He didn't know if it was his soulmate (and he couldn't help how his mind went directly to El on that point) or if he was secretly a musician, like his mom had thought for the first ten years of his life. Either way, it stayed with him all morning, through lunch, and was still repeating in his head when the bell rang for the end of the school day. He raced Lucas home and then kept on riding all the way out to the Byers', since it was his day to see El. When he got there, Jonathan answered the door.

"Hey Jonathan. Hey Mrs. By-"

"Shh!" she pushed herself up out of her chair just enough to poke her head over the top and wave her hand to quiet them, simultaneously pointing down the hall toward El's room. Mike strained to hear and when he could finally make it out, he could swear his heart stopped. She was singing the song.

There weren't any words, but she was humming it all the same. He felt the familiar warmth of a blush creeping up his neck and ducked his head, faking a cough to hide it.

"Can I go-?" he mouthed, pointing down the hall toward El's room and after she nodded, he stepped quietly down the hall and poked his head in the doorway. El was sitting cross-legged on her bed, a textbook on one knee and a notebook on the other in which she was calmly penciling in an answer. He was now even more sure that the song she was humming was the one that had been stuck in his head all day and suddenly he wondered if all those other unexplained ones had stuck with him for the same reason. He gently cleared his throat and El looked up.

"Mike!" she said with a smile.

"What were you singing?"

For a millisecond, her smile faltered, a tiny fracture, and she looked down and shrugged.

"It was nice," he offered, hoping she knew that the lopsided smile on his face was proof that he meant it. She looked back up and the fracture was gone.

He stood awkwardly in the doorway for a moment before he remembered she had no idea what he was thinking and was probably wondering why he was just standing there staring at her. He sat on the foot of her bed and chuckled.

"Okay, so this is going to sound really weird, but that song you were just humming? It's been stuck in my head all day."

"Really?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah. It happens a lot," he shrugged, smiling at her thoughtful expression.

"Me too," she smiled.

"You too?"

El nodded, a sparkle in her warm brown eyes. "You were singing that song yesterday. It was..." she paused, trying out the expression. "Stuck in my head, too."

His stomach flipped and he had a crazy thought about telling her what his grandma said. No, he thought, it's too corny. But the words

were already out of his mouth:

"My grandma used to say that's what happens when people are soulmates."

He watched El raise her eyebrows and inwardly groaned. The words had come bubbling out, like when someone shook a bottle of soda and took off the lid before the carbonation had settled so that a stream of foam and soda spurted out of the bottle, covering the counter and floor in a wet sticky mess.

"Soulmates?" El repeated.

"Yeah, I know, it- it's corny," he said, sighing and running a hand over the back of his neck.

El shook her head, smiling in that heartmeltingly gentle way of hers.

"It's not corny."

Mike looked down, struggling to keep the smile off his face. "Okay."

"I like being your soulmate."

He looked back up and didn't even try to stop smiling, especially since seeing El's smile and not smiling was pretty much impossible.

"Me too."

2. In Your Very Skin

She only saw it when she looked in the mirror, tiny black markings on her right shoulder spelling out the words *Are you okay?*

She asked Papa one day, standing in front of the tiny mirror above the sink in her cell, rolling up her sleeve to show him the markings on her skin. They were like the numbers inked into the inside of her wrist, but unlike them, these had only been on her skin since this morning. Also unlike them, she had no idea what they meant or why they were there.

She'd looked up at Papa, eyes searching his face for any kind of an answer, but as usual, her question was met with a tight-lipped smile as he firmly pulled the sleeve of her gown back over her shoulder.

"It's nothing. Don't pay any attention to it."

"Do you have one?"

Her hushed words seemed to echo off the cold tiled walls as Papa stared at her. Usually she didn't question him, but the words had slipped out before she could stop them. As his eyes narrowed, she wished she had, but at the same time, she didn't. She wanted to know. She knew what the numbers meant. He'd told her. They were a finger prodded in the center of her chest. They were who she was. Were these the same? Were they something about her? Why wouldn't he tell her? Papa's eyes were almost black as he leaned down to look into hers.

"Don't pay any attention to it. Do you understand?"

He placed a heavy hand on her right shoulder, emphasizing every word, and her insides felt as if they'd been doused in icy water. She swallowed the frost and nodded.

Papa smiled and that old familiar hope that it was a genuine one sprang up and then fizzled out. She'd obeyed him, she'd done what he wanted.

That was the first night she spent in the Room.

A year later, it happened again. A cat was hissing, Papa was waiting, and she was shaking her head, knowing she shouldn't, but doing it anyway.

Her shoulder burned against cold tile in a tiny room.

Are you okay?

A monster screeched and she ran.

Are you okay?

She screamed and a wall tore itself apart.

Are you okay?

A good man was shot and she ran.

Are you okay?

Water came down from the sky and a light shined in her face.

"Are you okay?"

Her heart was pounding, her lungs were screaming, water was pouring down her face from the rain or something else she didn't know which.

No. She wasn't okay. She wanted to shake her head, ask the boy shining the light into her face why he knew those words. But nothing came out.

A coat was placed over both her shoulders and she rolled away into the rain behind a boy without a coat.

She held the door and said "No." Something flickered in his eyes and he pulled his arm behind his back.

"Oh so you can speak!" he said with a smile.

The next morning, she saw the letters on the wrist he tried to hide: No.

Three years later, a row of tiny black letters was revealed on Joyce Byers' forearm: *Need a light?*

El touched her shoulder, her letters, and asked the question.

Joyce absently twisted the new ring on her hand and smiled sheepishly. "Oh, it's a soulmate mark. When you meet them, the first words they say show up." And she looked over her shoulder at Jim, who to all outward appearances wasn't listening, but the slight smile on his face gave him away.

El remembered a night in the rain, a door held open, a smile and a hidden arm. No.

When Mike held her hand that day, she stopped and stretched the collar of her shirt to reveal her letters. His eyebrows furrowed and she reached for his wrist, turning it to reveal his. She smiled up at him.

"Soulmate marks."

A blush spread across his face and she wrapped her fingers around his, leaning her head on his shoulder and realizing that she finally was *okay*.

3. A Healing Touch

Eleven had always known what a hug was.

She remembered receiving one from Papa when she was very small. It had been quick and cold but that didn't stop her from wishing, at least until she realized that the words of encouragement and love he spoke weren't real, that he would do it again.

There were two nurses. One of them hugged her one night after a particularly bad nightmare. She had only started watching Eleven the week before, but her arms were comforting and warm and made the memory a little less frightening.

She was gone the next day.

The second nurse didn't come for many years and he made the mistake of noticing the fear and wetness in her eyes after one of her tasks and gave her the quickest of embraces just outside the door to her room.

He kicked and screamed at the guards who appeared out of nowhere and dragged him somewhere where his screams no longer echoed off the tiled walls.

She reached out to Papa more times than she could count. To his retreating form as he left her room after giving her assignment and turned off the lights, through the door of the detention room, pounding her fists against it until they bruised and sometimes bled, in the bath where the only sound she could hear was the suffocation of water and her own screams. He never came.

Both Papa and the nurses gave her something, something she knew she could never have, something just out of her reach. It was almost as if there were a hole, a hole that yawned and gaped in the night when her terrors wrenched her from her sleep and all she wanted was the confirmation that she wasn't completely alone or in the moments when one of Papa's tasks left her feeling like everything inside her had been bruised and bloodied and broken. In those moments, she tried to remember. She tried to remember the feeling of safety and comfort that another pair of arms brought her, the sense that lessened but never fully took away the emptiness and coldness she felt.

The chill of the cliff that day reminded her of every time and the worst time when that hole had threatened to swallow her up, of every time she felt alone and afraid and abandoned, of every time

that she wanted nothing more than to know someone was there, that she was safe.

That day, she found it

"You saved me!"

For the first time in so many years, Eleven was hugged. She didn't know why the emptiness was suddenly filled or why the coldness had been replaced by warmth. She'd been in pain before and the nurses and Papa did nothing to change that. The pain was still there when they left, haunting her. Tears filled her eyes and she rested her head on Mike's shoulder. Why was this so different?

It would be over a year until she found out. After an explosion in a pumpkin patch and a flying piece of cabin wood embedded itself in one of her arms and all it took was Mike looking on in horror and desperately trying to staunch the flow of blood with his jacket and lifting it away to see that the wound had completely healed itself. After Mike sliced a hand on a shard of window glass in an alleyway and all it took was Eleven holding his hand to make the wound shrink into nothingness before their eyes. It was Nancy who saw, who'd run with them into the alley for refuge, who let out a whisper: "Soulmates." It was only after her explanation that a soulmate was someone's true partner, the one other person that completed them, that made them whole, that either of them realized they hadn't let go of each other's hand. Eleven suddenly remembered the hug on the quarry, the way they'd clutched each other's hands as they ran and waited, the kiss in the cafeteria, all moments when she'd felt that safety, that comfort. And all this time it was because it was Mike.

4. Everything Points to You

Compasses were amazing. They could take you anywhere you needed to go so long as you followed the little arrow. It might take a while, but you'd get there. He'd always thought they were cool, from the day he and his dad had gotten lost on a camping trip when he was six and a compass was what had saved them from having to live out the rest of their days in the woods. Since then, he'd taken his dad's compass everywhere, using it to get to school, to the grocery store, to the backyard, to the new ice cream store on Sixth. So long as he had his compass, he knew he'd never be lost. He always had a direction. The morning of his eighth birthday, he woke up to the distinct shape of a compass stamped into his right palm. It looked just like his own compass except there was no wood backing and no glass cover. Instead, it was flat, a tattoo with a tiny black arrow that actually turned when he moved his hand. It was a real compass. His mom took one look, not even a full look, just a glance, and said it was his soulmate mark.

"Soulmate mark?"

"Mm-hm. It points to your soulmate."

"What's a soulmate?"

"The person you're supposed to be with. Your souls are connected."

"Oh."

The idea that there was someone out there connected to his soul was kind of weird. Why were they connected? Did they have a compass on their hand too? Was it pointing at him? Were they far away or just next door?

He spent several weeks trying to follow it but when he got carried away and made it all the way to the town limits before realizing he was two hours late for supper and his mom was probably worried out of her mind, he decided he'd have to wait to find out. So he stopped trying to follow the arrow. It pointed east out of Hawkins and he never had a reason to leave town, so for years he ignored it. It never changed anyway.

Not until 1984 and the new girl swept into the classroom at Hawkins Middle. There was a buzzing in his palm and he looked down to see that after five years, the arrow had changed direction. And it was pointing at Max Mayfield.

She'd ignored it for months. Years, really. It had shown up when she was eight and she'd found out what it was when some kid at school saw it and laughed at her. It wasn't the last time she'd have to close her hand over it and orient her fist at somebody's face.

Soulmates weren't real anyway. As if people's souls were actually connected, yeah right. So why should she care that her first day at this stupid school it was buzzing and pointing at the kid from the arcade with the curls and the hat? Soulmates weren't real. And that was all there was to it.

It didn't matter that even though the first time they met they were already fighting head to head over the high score in Dragon's Lair she noticed how he laughed with his friends outside on the benches and something flickered in her chest.

It didn't matter that when they were given their lab partners for the semester she almost wished that she could switch places with the Wheeler kid and felt way too happy when Mr. Clarke did switch them because her partner needed all the help he could get and Mike could be more help than she could, the new kid who didn't want to be there.

It didn't matter that every time she walked past his desk her face started heating up for some reason she couldn't and really didn't want to explain.

It didn't matter that the first time she saw him cornered by the resident punks her blood boiled with a ferocity she wouldn't have expected to feel over someone she barely knew.

It didn't matter that as the jerks ran into the distance with bloody noses and black eyes her stomach flipped when he smiled and said thanks as she wiped the blood off her knuckles.

It didn't matter that he noticed her compass as she shook off the pain in her hand, particularly the part where it was pointing at him, and it definitely didn't matter that he reflexively opened his own hand and his own compass arrow was pointing back at her.

None of that mattered.

Because soulmates weren't real.

Were they?